

**Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra
Program Notes for Concert May 7, 2016**

by Geoffrey Decker

**Symphony No. 2 in C Minor ("Resurrection Symphony")
by Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)**

Austrian composer and conductor Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in C minor, known in German as the *Auferstehungssymphonie*, or "Resurrection Symphony," is as ambitious a project as any by a young composer who had only recently published his first foray into the genre of the symphony for orchestra. The work and the forces necessary to perform it make it a huge undertaking. The giant orchestra with a large percussion section is supplemented by an off-stage brass band (with its own percussion!), organ, a soprano soloist, an alto soloist, and full chorus.



Gustav Mahler at about the time he conceived of his Second Symphony.

But, with the title "Resurrection," we are tempted to ask whether a 24-year-old could accurately conjure up something that even remotely "sounds" like resurrection, or at least how humans might think of it. After hearing the work, though, most of us strangely feel something akin to believing the depiction "authentic," "realistic," or something similar. There is good reason for this; from a very young age, Mahler was affected by death and, after a visit with famed psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, in the early twentieth century, Mahler's obsession with death was abundantly clear to him and Dr. Freud.

With some breaks necessitated by his work as a conductor, Mahler's Second

Symphony took form in his mind nearly every day for the six years between 1888-1894. In the liner notes he wrote for a Philips CD release of the work, British music historian Robert Layton reminds us that Mahler was at work on it in the decade that saw the introduction of both Bruckner's and Dvořák's Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, Franck's Symphony in D minor, Sibelius' Kullervo Symphony, and Nielsen's First Symphony. But perhaps more than all the others, Mahler's Second changed the course of music with its impact on the genre of the symphony; it introduced the "song symphony."

Pinning down the exact moment when Mahler conceived, or at least began composing, his Second Symphony is not easy. In 1887, when his First Symphony had yet to find its final form, he completed a symphonic movement named *Todtenfeier* ("Funeral Rite"). Mahler completed it in autumn 1888 and inscribed the score *Symphonie in C moll/1. Satz* ("Symphony in C minor/1st Movement") with hopes of returning to it.

At about the same time, though, Mahler took over the directorship of the Budapest Opera and, shortly after that, the Hamburg Opera where his work load conducting up to 19 operas per month precluded his further work on a second symphony. When he finally returned to it in 1893, he had in the interim removed the "Symphonie in C moll" designation. He restored the designation and work began on the remaining movements. Before he could work in full earnestness, though, Mahler had also needed to throw off the shadow of the great Beethoven whose Ninth Symphony was considered the last "true" symphony.

Always the good Wagnerianⁱ, Mahler made an early pilgrimage to Bayreuth to see Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The Ring of the Nibelungs"). Wagner sought and, to Mahler among many others, succeeded in encompassing a "whole world" within his four giant music dramas that comprise the *Ring*, operas with which he brought to the stage his ideas about the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or "Complete Work of Art." Mahler believed that Wagner's work justified writing symphonic music that also encompassed a "whole world." This belief set Mahler free to compose as he really pleased while shirking the shadow of Beethoven.

Later, in 1901, Mahler wrote a programmatic description for each of his first four symphonies. Although he was later to disavow programs for symphonic works, it is interesting to consider what he wrote of the first movement of the Second Symphony, eventually titled *Mit durchaus ernstem und feierlichem Ausdruck* ("With serious and solemn expression throughout"). Paraphrased here, he wrote that it is during the first movement that we stand by the coffin of a well-loved person whose life, struggles, passions and aspirations pass before us. And even prior to that, he made reference to his

First Symphony and how it relates to the new work in another description of the Second Symphony's first movement shortly after the work's première in 1896: "It is the hero of my D Major symphony that we bear to the grave."

The first movement's vast dimension is not only made up of the fact that it lasts 25 minutes alone but also because of the very tragic and dramatic power it expresses. It was something very new to music, especially to the genre of the symphony. Although it would be superseded in length and perhaps even drama by the first movements of his Third, Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the first audiences were probably as shocked as those that heard Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* for the first time.

With the gigantic first movement completed, Mahler worked on the second and third movements while sitting in his little composing cabin that can still be seen sitting beside the Attersee in Steinbach am Attersee directly east of Salzburg in the Austrian Alps. Both movements are somewhat intermezzo-like considering what was to follow.



Mahler's
Komponierhäuschen
(composing hut) beside the
Attersee near Steinbach
am Attersee in the Austrian
Alps.

The second movement, titled *Sehr gemächlich. Nie eilen* ("Very leisurely. Never rushed"), is indeed leisurely, relaxed and genial. One might even consider it pastoral; but, seeing where it was composed alongside Lake Attersee, it is easier to imagine Mahler's inspiration for something so song-like and simple. It is an Austrian country dance, a *Ländler*, that, in Mahler's words, recalls "happy moments from the past." It is a "shaft of sunlight from out of the life of this hero" and his melancholy recollection of youth and lost innocence.

The third movement, titled *In ruhig fließender Bewegung* ("In peacefully flowing motion"), is the work's traditional lively *scherzo* movement. Although the word *scherzo* is Italian, some believe it to be derived from the word *Scherz* ("hoax" or "joke") of German origin. It is in this movement that

we hear Mahler's schizophrenic-like reminiscences of his youth. The short two-clarinet and two-trumpet melodies and harmony have a strong eastern European sound, recalling what might have been the traditional Klezmer ensemble of the Ashkenazi Jews performing for a wedding or other celebration.

But as the movement progresses, we realize that this movement is no joke. At the end, the young hero is back from his recollections and facing reality. In an almost childlike manner, he cannot comprehend the stability that love brings to each of our lives and, with the cataclysmic ending of the movement, the hero is left in despair, questioning both himself and whether God really exists.

In the fourth movement, titled *Urlicht* ("Primeval Light") and subtitled *Sehr feierlich, aber schlicht* ("Very solemn, yet simple"), Mahler sets to music the poem titled *O Röschen Rot* ("Oh, little red rose"), one among his many favorites from the collection of German folk poetry titled *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* ("The Youth's Magic Horn"), a set gathered, edited, and published by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano in 1806. Scored for mezzo-soprano, we might be tempted to believe it to be sung by our hero himself, a youthful young man. It is not clear as to who is singing it but it is clear that the focus of the movement is the phrase, "Ich bin von Gott und ich will wieder zu Gott!" (I am from God and want to return to God!)

Finally, the giant fifth movement, simply titled *Im Tempo des Scherzos* ("In the tempo of the scherzo"), reaches a level of drama and power perhaps never before heard in any piece of music, even in Wagner's Ring! Once again, Robert Layton describes the movement perfectly:

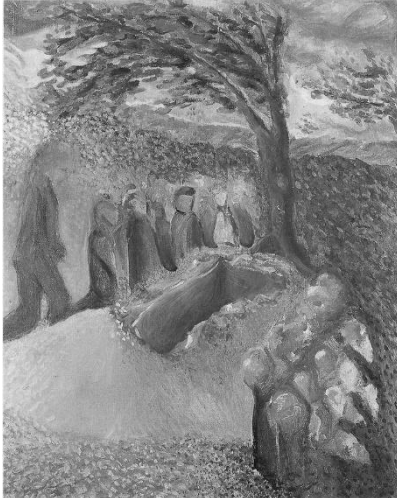
"In the finale we are again confronted by the awesome question of the meaning of life and return to the mood of the first movement. A call is heard: the end of all living things is at hand; the Last Judgement is announced. The earth trembles, graves burst open, the dead arise and step forth in long endless lines. The great and the small of this earth, kings and beggars, the just and the ungodly – all are making the pilgrimage, the cry for mercy and grace falls terrifyingly on our ear. The great summons is heard; the trumpets of the Apocalypse ring out; but in the middle of the awful silence which follows we think we hear in the furthest distance a nightingale, like a last quivering echo of earthly life. Softly, a chorus of heavenly beings is heard. 'Thou shalt arise, again surely thou shalt arise! There appears the glory of God! A wonderful gentle light permeates us to our very being! And behold it is no judgement, there are no sinners, no just. None is great,

none small – there is no punishment and no reward! An almighty feeling of love illumines us with blessed knowing and being!”

Because he had already been hard at work on the final movement, there is some question to Mahler's claim that it was a revelation hearing a boys' choir intone German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock's (1724-1803) ode *Aufersteh'n* ("Resurrection") during the funeral of the famed German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow in February 1894. He eventually chose Klopstock's text for the magnificent final soaring chorus of his Second Symphony.

Although the first three movements had been presented in public earlier, Mahler conducted the première of the full symphony in Berlin in 1895. It is scored for a gigantic orchestra of ten horns; eight to ten trumpets; quadrupled woodwinds; a huge percussion section that includes seven timpani, glockenspiel, and bells; two groups of harps; organ; as large a complement of strings as can be had; two vocal soloists; and a chorus. Some of the brass and percussion can be heard as an off-stage ensemble in the final movement.

Mahler's Second Symphony changed things forever. In fact, Mahler's own untimely demise at the age of 50 greatly affected many musicians and other artists of the time, especially those who had studied with him. One of those students was the composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) who had, at first, despised Mahler's work but, after hearing Mahler's Third Symphony, considered him a saint. Mahler held Schoenberg in high esteem but, after seeing Schoenberg's strange twelve-tone ideas about melody and harmony, worried about the direction he was headed. In fact, he was so worried that he wondered who would take care of Schoenberg once he died. Schoenberg attended the master's funeral and, several years later, painted what he titled *The Burial of Mahler*. Although fairly abstract, the coldness of the grave and the facelessness of the mourners is disturbing.

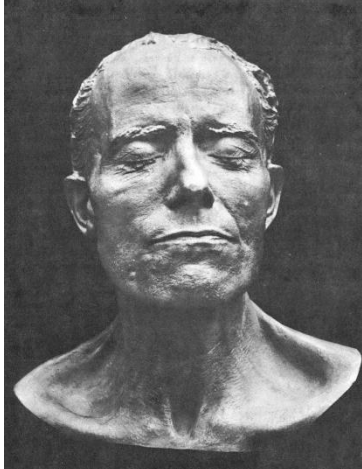


Arnold Schoenberg's painting, *The Burial of Mahler* (1915).

Among the many musicians who can lay claim to knowing Mahler's music, none can more than conductors Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer, both champions of Mahler's Second Symphony and of his music overall. Both personally knew and worked with the composer himself. In fact, and in spite of Mahler's wife, Alma, doing all she could behind the scenes to taint their relationship for one reason or another, Walter was close enough to the composer to be present in the room at the Sanatorium Löw in Vienna's 2nd District when Mahler died of chronic endocarditis at 11:05 PM on May 18, 1911.

Although anything she said or wrote must be carefully scrutinized, Mahler's widow later wrote in her memoirs, "With that last breath his beloved and beautiful soul had fled, and the silence was more deathly than all else. As long as he breathed he was still there. But now was all over I shall never forget his dying hours, the grandeur of his face, which grew ever more beautiful as death drew nearer. His genuine struggle for eternal values, his ability to rise above everyday matters, and his unflinching devotion to truth are an example of a saintly existence."

In the fourth volume of his massive biography of Mahler, the French music historian Henri Louis de la Grange quotes Alfred Rollerⁱⁱ: "When I went to take my leave of Mahler's mortal remains on the morning after his death, his features still bore traces of his long and tormenting struggle with death. Klimtⁱⁱⁱ, who saw him several hours later, told me how solemnly calm and sublimely beautiful they later became, and it is thus that they appear in the wonderful death mask taken by Moll^{iv}."



Mahler's death mask taken by the painter Carl Moll the evening following the composer's death.

Perhaps Mahler knew more about the translation from life to death than some might have credited him when his Second Symphony premièred. We might have to admit that he seemed to understand life after death and the resurrection in his twenties. Living with his Second Symphony – the Resurrection Symphony – the last 17 years of his life perhaps helped to answer his questions about what happens to us after death and, as he drew closer to his end and his soul left his body, a calm and beauty came to his earthly countenance because what he saw ahead satisfied him.

Recommended Recordings

As stated above, because of their collaboration with the composer himself, there are probably no more authentic performances and recordings of the Resurrection Symphony than those conducted by Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer. Few know that Klemperer conducted the off-stage brass band in a performance of the Second Symphony conducted by Mahler himself. In fact, Mahler was so impressed with Klemperer that he took out one of his cart-de-visite – a sort of business card of the day – and wrote a short recommendation for Klemperer on the back. Klemperer kept it close to his heart for the many years of his life to follow.

Late in Bruno Walter's life, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) decided to record some of the works with which he was closely associated; and, of course, Mahler Symphonies were at the top of the list. During his so-called "Indian Summer" in the early 1960s, CBS recorded some of Walter's core repertoire at the American Legion Hall near Walter's home in Hollywood. His recording of the Second Symphony is not one of those recorded then,

though. It was instead recorded in somewhat early stereo with the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall in both February 1957 and February 1958. It is an excellent performance, especially due to the New York Philharmonic's virtuosity and the vocal contribution of mezzo-soprano Maureen Forrester. Although plagued by some tape hiss and available in many different CBS and Sony releases, it can easily and best be had as a finely remastered download from Pristine Classical at <https://www.pristineclassical.com/pasc385.html>. The expert Andrew Rose has worked wonders remastering it.

Both Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer left behind live performances of the work caught on tape but, like Walter's New York recording, Klemperer's studio performance for EMI recorded in London's Kingsway Hall in November 1961 and March 1962 is beyond words. The excellent Philharmonia Orchestra and Philharmonia Chorus – the latter trained by famed Bayreuth chorus master Wilhelm Pitz – cannot be beat, even by Walter. And it is a treat to have soloists like soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and mezzo Hilde Rössl-Majdan.

More modern recordings highly recommended are the two made by Claudio Abbado for Deutsche Grammophon, his earlier made with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in February 1976 and his later recorded in concert with his hand-picked Lucerne Festival Orchestra in August 2003. The second recording caught in concert by Deutsche Grammophon with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic shows his affinity with Mahler and his willingness to expose raw emotion. The German mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig is nonpareil in the *Urlicht* movement.

Comparing the recordings above with that of Czech conductor Rafael Kubelík and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra recorded by Deutsche Grammophon in March 1969 is a bit like comparing Mercedes Benzes with something much simpler, perhaps more emotionally affordable and closer to earth; perhaps something like a Volkswagen Beetle. There is a kind of folksiness and firmer foundation to Kubelík's recording that is missing in many. The Resurrection caught in his recording is one that is much more for the masses. It is an excellent performance and recording all around, and it might be closer to the truth Mahler had in mind than all of the other recordings. It is very special indeed.

ⁱ A person who subscribes to the music and philosophy about musical drama as presented by German composer Richard Wagner in both his music and his essays about music.

ⁱⁱ Alfred Roller (1864-1935) was a prominent painter of the *Vienna Secession* movement but left it to take a teaching position at the Vienna University of Applied Arts and eventually became Mahler's stage designer at the Vienna Court Opera, today known as the Wiener Staatsoper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) was one of the most prominent painters of the *Vienna Secession* movement.

^{iv} Carl Moll (1861-1945) was a prominent painter of the *Vienna Secession* movement.

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